

HOW TO BE 'CIVILISATIONAL': PROMOTING "TRUSTED EUROPEAN PLATFORMS"

JIM CLOOS
TEPSA

EDITORIAL



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["We need civilisational allies,"](#) says a State Department paper officially presented by the United States (US) Secretary of State a few weeks ago. Behind the lofty title we discover a fully-fledged ideological assault on the European way of life: "Europe has devolved into a hotbed of digital censorship, mass migration, restrictions on religious freedom, and numerous other assaults on democratic self-governance," writes the author. The new authoritarians in Washington preach "free speech" to the Europeans while censoring opponents and academics at home. They accuse the Europeans of undermining democracy and Western values while pushing electoral gerrymandering to new heights. What they mean by being "civilisational" is in fact a radical departure from the traditional Western values. In a recent interview with the [Leading European Newspaper Alliance](#), Giuliano da Empoli warns against the 'engineers of chaos' and the 'new predators;' he thinks that Europe is the last ramparts against them taking over. That is not romantic rhetoric. It is a hard, sober assessment. If Europe cannot show that democracy, freedom, and trust can thrive in the digital age, those who prefer manipulation over truth, centralised control over individual freedom, spectacle over debate, will shape the future.

Against this background, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, in her 2025 State of the Union speech before the European Parliament, rightly sounded the alarm. She spoke again of the need for a **European Democracy Shield**: to fight disinformation, protect the rule of law, and strengthen the resilience of our societies, including through media literacy. She listed initiatives such as a Centre for Democratic Resilience, a Media Resilience Programme, and support for independent journalism. This agenda deserves support. Independent and local media must have access to funding. Quality journalism must be protected.

A common European framework against manipulation of information is indispensable.

But let us be honest: it is not enough.

A shield is defensive. It is necessary, but insufficient. Civilisation cannot survive behind walls alone. It needs creative strength, positive energy, and the ability to build. Europe needs not only to regulate but to create. And it needs strong political leadership with a long-term vision transcending short-term electoral cycles.

In a recent conversation, Christophe Leclercq, the founder of Euractiv and Europe MédiaLab, strongly emphasised this point. He said that if Europe is entirely dependent on foreign digital platforms, no amount of defensive legislation will suffice.

The reality is stark: six global 'gatekeepers' dominate online advertising, social media, and the digital economy. All of them are foreign. We can regulate them, but we cannot escape the fact that our societies - citizens, businesses, and even governments - depend on them and on smartphones. As another friend put it: "I am writing this on Google, from an Apple iPhone. I speak to most political colleagues via WhatsApp, owned by Meta. I use Microsoft Office for my work. If there were a European company offering these services, I would gladly switch. But there is not. Europe has completely failed to build anything comparable to Silicon Valley."

This is not only a market failure. It is a **civilisational failure**.

We know self-regulation does not work. We know the platforms act only when forced, and even then, they drag their feet. And with the tightening embrace between Big Tech and the new US administration, Europe's leverage is shrinking. Look at Twitter (or X, as it now calls itself). Its credibility is collapsing, it has

lost eleven million European users between April 2024 and April 2025, yet journalists and politicians across Europe remain chained to it because there is not yet a comparative alternative.

The conclusion is unavoidable: Europe needs its own platforms. This is not about blocking or banning American or Chinese platforms. It is not a hostile act, nor an isolationist move. It is about enhancing our sovereignty, resilience, and freedom of choice. Europe needs its own platforms to ensure alternatives exist. Only then will regulation gain teeth. Only then will citizens, businesses, and governments have leeway to shape their digital futures. The problem is that these European alternatives do not exist, so they have no lobby, no champions, no voice in Brussels nor in national capitals. The debate, for now, stays one-sided.

It is time to change that. Europe should launch a **“Trusted European Platforms”** (TEPs) initiative - a process providing TEPs labels. Independent review boards could certify trustworthiness. Platforms would commit to using trust indicators, promoting their algorithms quality content versus fake news. Governments, civil society, and entrepreneurs could work together to create an infrastructure for democracy in the digital age.

This will not be easy. But Europe has done the impossible before. Think of Airbus, born when no one believed Europeans could rival Boeing. Think of Galileo, created when reliance on America's global positioning systems became strategically risky. Think of Ariane and Mistral. These projects, too, were once fantasies. Today they are pillars of Europe's strategic autonomy. Why should digital platforms be different?

At the same time, we need quick progress on

trusted European cloud services and on secure European data centres. Europe has a unique wealth of industrial and professional data: with only 20% of them employed, the margin of improvement is massive. The information ecosystem is not a secondary sector. It is the backbone of our societies. Ensuring trust online is as important as defence.

We need practical steps now. Europe can mobilise **venture capital** towards these goals. This does not mean creating white elephants-giant, state-run 'Euro-Facebooks' doomed to fail. It means supporting genuine entrepreneurial action, rooted in Europe's strengths. Second, the EU and Member States should prioritise **research and development financing** in digital sovereignty, much as they do for energy or defence. Third, a **cross-sectoral expert committee** should define criteria for TEPs, ensuring they meet democratic standards of transparency, privacy, accountability, and interoperability, and foster pluralism in the social media landscape. Fourth, **events** should build momentum among stakeholders and **campaigns** should gather a critical mass of users.

We should also think creatively about alliances. Europe has a vast advertising sector, wishing alternatives to dominant US platforms. Why not link it with new European platforms? With a Single Market of 450 million people, the scale already exists. The same goes for schools and universities. There are vast possibilities of creating alternatives to the dominance of American tech giants. And maybe not just alternatives or “derivative products,” but entirely new original media platforms. Being creative and producing innovative products based on the way Europeans communicate with one other is key for these new platforms to succeed.

The challenge is urgent. Europe cannot afford another decade of hesitation. Each year lost further entrenches dependence on foreign monopolies and allows disinformation, manipulation, and polarisation to grow.

This is much more than a mere economic issue. It is a matter of democracy itself. If we do not control our digital infrastructure, we cannot control the integrity of our debates, and our elections, our institutions, and our freedoms will always be vulnerable.

A Democracy Shield is necessary. European Union (EU) digital legislation, like the Digital Services Act and the Digital Markets Act, remains key, not least to ensure algorithm transparency. The EU must resist attempts from outside powers to undermine it. But a Democracy Engine is even more necessary, in the shape of Trusted European Platforms.

That is how Europe can remain a global player and a stabilising factor in the world: by showing that in the digital age, being civilisational is not a mask for power, but a commitment to truth, trust, and freedom.

All the opinions expressed in this publication are the sole view of the author, and do not represent the position of the Trans European Policy Studies Association (TEPSA) or of its Members.

Editing & Formatting: Mariam Khotenashvili, Eva Ribera, Barbara Vanotti & Allegra Wirmer (TEPSA).

Jim Cloos is TEPSA Secretary-General and a former high-ranking European official of longstanding esteem. Having taken on a key role in drafting the Maastricht Treaty during the Luxembourgish Presidency of the Council of the European Union in 1991, Mr. Cloos has an intricate expertise on EU Affairs and the internal functioning of the European institutions. In the 1990s he served at the European Commission, first as Head of the Cabinet of the Commissioner for Agriculture, and subsequently as Head of Cabinet to the President of the European Commission and his G7/8 Sherpa. Mr. Cloos has been a close collaborator of High Representative Javier Solana in shaping the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy. For many years he played a key role in preparing European Council meetings. Before his election as TEPSA Secretary-General, he served as Deputy Director General for General and Institutional Policy at the General Secretariat of the Council of the European Union.

